

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Virginia Tech

BRIAN BRITT

Many readers of Walter Benjamin have commented on the place of religion in his work, especially in terms of messianism and Judaism, but few of these discussions go beyond generalities. This special issue of *JCRT* on Walter Benjamin represents the first volume to explore this thinker's work in dialogue with current theory of religion. The essays collected here contribute to the scholarship on Benjamin and the theory of religion, with the hope that they will bridge these two sets of conversations and generate new work between them.

Serious engagement of Benjamin's work with current theory of religion is long overdue. The first generation of Benjamin scholars tended to project Benjamin onto a spectrum running from secular Marxism to mystical Judaism. These two extremes, which can be associated with Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem, continued to shape readings of Benjamin by Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Beatrice Hanssen, and others. More recently, nuanced readings of religion in Benjamin by Irving Wohlfarth, Michael Jennings, Daniel Weidner, along with broader engagements by theorists like Talal Asad, Judith Butler, and Slavoj Žižek, have begun to reach wider audiences in the study of religion.

The seven essays collected here offer sustained readings of Benjamin's work in dialogue with religious theory. Some, like Roger K. Green's "Benjamin, Method, and Weak Messianism" and Yael Almog's "Walter Benjamin's World of Things," carry our understanding of a familiar theme in Benjamin to new territory, engaging contemporary methodological discussions in religious studies. Through a reading of messianism in Benjamin and Catherine Keller's *Political Theology of the Earth*, Green suggests an "intellectual and interdisciplinary promiscuity" rooted in Benjamin's notion of messianism as a source for theoretical and methodological work in religious studies. In her reading of *Berlin Childhood*, Benjamin's childhood memoir, Almog considers two spiritual valences of the text—one drawn from the "new materialism" that blurs the boundary between animate humans and inanimate things, and another that displaces a conventional human perspective through non-linear history.

Other essays engage the theory of religion and political theory by rigorously analyzing Benjamin's texts in context. Carlo Salzani's "False Religions and True Politics: Countering Capitalism as Religion" reads Benjamin's unpublished fragment "Capitalism as Religion" closely as part of a project to theorize a radical reversal or rupture (*Umkehr*) in politics. Nitzan Lebovic's "Benjamin: To the Rhythm of Theological Concepts" presents an original, far-reaching account of Benjamin's philosophy of history grounded in theology and connected by his recurring uses of the concept of rhythm.

Ori Rotlevy's "Critique in a Postsecular Age" draws a conception of tradition out of Benjamin's early Kantian writings, arguing (against

Habermas and others) that tradition can be understood as a medium of history. Rotlevy's contribution expands the conception of tradition not just in Benjamin but also for the study of religion generally. My contribution, "Benjamin's Habits and the Study of Religion," attempts to connect brief but significant discussions of theoretical and religious activity in Benjamin to current discussions of spiritual exercises, lived religion, and habit. Daniel Weidner's "Life after Life: A Figure of Thought in Walter Benjamin" lucidly brings Benjamin's elaborate reflections on "afterlife" into dialogue with the growing field of reception studies in religion as well as hermeneutical theory.